DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 634 EA 018 122

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TITLE	A Teamed Approach to Making the Transition to a Middle School.
PUB DATE	Dec 85
NOTE	20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Kansas Association of School Boards (Topeka, KS, December 2-3, 1985).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Change Strategies; College School Cooperation; Community Support; Consultants; Curriculum Evaluation; Educational Change; *Instructional Program Divisions; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Middle Schools; Needs Assessment; *Organizational Change; Physical Characteristics; *School Organization; Student Characteristics; Superintendents; Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS	*Augusta Unified School District 402 KS

ABSTRACT

To improve the existing junior high school's academic and activities programs as well as the school environment, a school superintendent and a middle school consultant teamed with others to effect the transition of a 7-9 grade junior high school plan to a 6-8 grade middle school plan in Augusta, Kansas. The overall plan was basically simple and straightforward: assess needs, develop alternatives, educate participants, collectively decide courses of action, gain support, push for reform, initiate phasing-in plans, finalize decisions, evaluate progress, and share findings. The consultant examined all academic records in reading and mathematics for students then in grades 4-9. The school nurse supplied data for heights and weights for these same students. Principals and their assistants, at all grade levels, were interviewed for insights into both academic and social growth characteristics of these students. The consultant and superintendent met with several groups of school and community people to assess attitude, concern, and interest in school improvement. Based on the students' characteristics and the concerns of the school and community members, a series of concerns and recommendations emerged. The basic planning model used in the organizational change is presented along with some general principles of operation that should be followed in making a transition to a different organization of classes in a district. (MLF)

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A TEAMED APPROACH TO MAKING THE TRANSITION TO A MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Presented to

SESSION OF ANNUAL MEETING OF KANSAS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BOARDS

TOPEKA, KANSAS
December 2 & 3, 1985

EA 018 122

A TEAMED APPROACH TO MAKING THE TRANSITION TO A MIDDLE SCHOOL

Alexander (1968) defines a middle school as "a school which combines into one organization and facility certain school years (usually grades 5-8 or 6-8) which have in the past usually been separated in elementary and secondary schools under such plans as the 6-3-3, 6-2-4, and 6-6." Alexander (1984) further cites U.S. Department of Education sources which indicate the following number of middle schools by grade level organization:

GRADE LEVEL	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	% OF TOTAL
7-8-9	3,340	29
7-8	2,550	22
6-7-8	3,144	28
5-6-7-8	944	8
other	1,428	13
TOTALS	11,406	100%

Many of these middle level schools, have for one or more reasons --administrative expediency, organizational demand, instructional necessity, and/or curricular improvement--made a transition from a former organizational format to the present configuration. The dialogue that follows is between a school superintendent (Dr. Lyle E. Boyles) and a middle school consultant (Dr. Michael James) who teamed with others to effect the transition from a 7-9 junior high school plan to a 6-8 middle school plan in Augusta, Kansas--a class 4A, school/ community suburban to Wichita.

Dr. Boyles, could you fill us in on the background of what led up to this venture in curricula change?

When a decision is made at the district-level to seriously consider a change from the traditional junior high to a middle school, levels of anxiety, concerns about new roles, temptations to remain with the familiar, and other similar human conditions become visible. How, then, is such an educational change most conveniently undertaken and completed while, at the same time, attending to the aforementioned condition? One successful approach was developed in the Augusta, Kansas Public Schools.

In the spring of 1980, the Board of Education began to discuss the possibility of developing a study in regard to the application of the middle school concept in the Augusta Schools. The idea of improvements in the existing junior high's academic and activities programs as well as the school environment, generally, had been presented to the Board by the Superintendent, Dr. Lyle E. Boyles, at various times during the preceding fall. Although some problems were not all that unusual for traditional junior highs, some problems centering around drop-out, low reading scores, higher than expected rates of failing, and loss of student interest in activities were significant and required improvement efforts.

Dr. James, what sort of educational experiences did you bring to this venture?

For four years, I was a middle grades teacher in the Tucson (A2) public schools. All of my graduate degrees works was in curriculum and instruction (K-8) and learning and teaching theory. I have been an advocate for reform in middle grades education since the early 1970's and a consultant to many school districts throughout the United States for improvement in programs for early adolescent learners. As

a 10 year member of the National Middle School Association and founder of the Kansas Association for Middle Level Education (KAMLE) I have been quite active in seeking certification, accreditation, and programatic standards for middle grades education--whether upper elementary, intermediate grades, junior high school or so-called middle schools.

Dr. Boyles, is your background similar to Dr. James'?

I entered into the study of the middle school potential in Augusta from the standpoint of the superintendency. Traditionally, I believe that the prototype of the school superintendency tends to be oriented toward the management of educational services and all those things that go along those lines. However, I have had experience in higher education as an administrator and teacher so believe that my direct involvement in the middle school study came as a result of having done similar things in the past. Further, I believe that I gained an added bit of understanding from that experience which calls for a clear definition of role responsibilities and relationships in anything as complicated as a full-blown study for change in the existing school organization. In the final analysis, I believe that my role became one of serving as a translator in the process of putting theory into practice. In short, my past experience coupled with my present experience helped me to live in both worlds as the need arose.

With so different a background, Dr. Boyles, how did you and Dr. James build a successful working relationship?

From the very onset when consultant and school superintendent first met to this point in time as they collaboratively share their experiences, all parties have remained positive, purposeful, and persuaded of and by their efforts to improve the educational program of experiences for all students but especially those ages 11-14.

The overall plan was basically simple and straightforward: assess needs, develop alternatives, educate participants, collectively decide courses of action, gain support, push for reform, initiate phasing-in plans, finalize decisions, evaluate progress, and share findings. This fall, after nearly three years of study, planning, convincing, further study and final planning, this school district will initiate a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 organizational plan that includes the beginnings of several exemplary middle school concept programs. Exactly how this all came about will be the subject of the following more specific description.

In order to commence the study, the Board appointed an administrative/faculty/citizen committee. In addition, a consultant in middle-level education, Dr. Michael A. James, Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, at Wichita State University was employed to guide the work of the committee. As the tasks of the committee commenced, Dr. James' role became known as the "Principal Investigator" due to the need to collect a great deal of data, conduct a number of interviews, and advise the committee.

Dr. James, what were the first steps in this project on curricula change?

After several preliminary discussions between the school superintendent and the consultant, the Board of Education agreed in principle to support a study of actual and perceived needs and information. The consultant examined all academic records in reading and mathematics for students then in grades 4-9. The school nurse supplied data for heights and weights for these same students. Elementary, Junior High and Senior High School principals (and assistants) were interviewed for insights into both academic and social growth characteristics

of these students. Based on some of Eichhorn's findings from the Boyce Study (Eichhorn,1967), the consultant concluded from these data that generally sixth grade students were more like seventh and eighth graders than like fourth and fifth grade students, and ninth grade students at least socially and physically were more like their high school counterparts than the younger, more immature seventh and eighth grade school mates. These findings have been corroborated in several other demographic studies of this age group of learners.

Following this phase of the data gathering assessment, the consultant and superintendent met with several groups of school and community people to assess attitude, concern, and interest in school improvement. Using the audio film strip "The Middle School Story," groups of parents, teachers, students, and community leaders were invited to comment on the positive and negative aspects of their junior high school education and, if given the chance to change things, how and what would they change. This more informal assessment technique generated an enormous amount of ideas and interest in the initial development of plans for middle grades program improvements. Participants sensed a degree of ownership in the process and possible outcomes. Not surprisingly, parents wanted a safer environment for their children - both physically and psychologically. Teachers wanted more emphasis on programs planning and internal communications. Students in both the current junior high school and high school wanted more time to socialize constructively, survival skill development opportunities (like how to say "no" to drugs, etc.), and relevant short course options.

Administrators seemed to support the notion that improvement changes would allow them at all levels to better meet the needs of their students and parent clientele.

Dr. Boyles, what were the outcomes of this assessment process for your district?

The major focus of all data gathering conferences and meetings was for the principal investigator to determine perceptions held of these individuals and groups concerning what kind of an educational program exists and/or should exist for students between the ages of 10-14 years in Augusta.

General Findings and Recommendations: All individuals and groups with whom the principal investigator met were very receptive to sharing their views on the educational programming for early adolescent learners. Several concerns emerged by consensus that warrant review.

1. Any curricular revision for the education of the early adolescent learner should emphasize the mastery of basic skills in mathematics, languaging skills, and reading. These skills which are begun at the elementary level need to be articulated with middle level educators to assure proper entry levels of skill attainment into the specialized high school curricula.

   Recommendation: A special ad hoc sub-committee of the District-wide Curriculum Committee be charged with a review of skill attainment and expectation ranging from K-12 with a special emphasis placed on appropriate instructional needs at the middle level. Much of this work is currently underway, but a refocusing to support curricular revision is warranted.

2. Any organizational restructuring of grade levels away from the current K-6, 7-9, 10-12 format will cause space problems at the high school. In the elementary schools, space is tight currently possibly hindering some programs and inconveniencing others. Due to the physical layout of the junior high school,

the current level of programming can be accomodated, but any revisions or expansions of program would be greatly handicapped by the current physical facilities. Although the high school is relatively new, faculty and staff feel that if another grade-level were included, that both space allocations and class sizes would be problems.

Recommendations: Before any grade-level reorganization be undertaken, a facilities and cite study of the junior high school complex should be conducted with the purpose being to assess the practicality of major remodeling of existing facilities or for replacement by a new middle level structure on the present cite or some alternative location. Furthermore, if a grade level reorganization were considered, the high school should be studied for the impact such a move would have on space allocation and class size. An architect, financial expert and selected program planners should be included in conducting the facilities/cite study.

3. Many parties interviewed felt the junior high school curricular and instructional program was adequate, but did not meet several necessary needs of the early adolescent learner. Because of the departmentalization, scheduling and limitations imposed by the physical plant, coupled with the secondary education training of most of the staff, responsibility for better socialization processes, human development and personal survival skill development, plus equal opportunity for learners to participate in a wider variety of elective or short course, intra-mural, and activity experiences is lacking.

Recommendation: If no grade level reorganization is affected, the junior high school staff and administration should consider alternative scheduling patterns that would deemphasize a continuous-

process approach to basic skills coupled with a more interdisciplinary planned problem solving (applicational) curriculum in the major academic subjects. Furthermore, the related arts program should be reviewed to assess both required and optional offerings of a more expanded, interest-oriented nature. Also, a more personalized home-base advisory system should be considered to assist the learner's transition into the junior high school and his/her early adolescent years. The 9th grade should be structured consistent with the high school curriculum including appropriate elective offerings.

If a grade level reorganization is affected, then many of these forementioned suggestions should still exist for grades 7 and 8 while lower grades (possibly only 6th) could be more self-contained for the academics but with exploratory options in the related arts.

Specific Findings and Recommendations: All education programs are designed to meet the needs of the learners. Some practices emerge that better meet these needs. Frequently academic needs outweigh other non-academic but social, emotional, and physical characteristics needs in learners. A balanced curriculum is considered appropriate.

The principal investigator analyzed available data related to physical (height and weight) characteristics and intellectual characteristics (achievement test scores). Social characteristics information was gained by interviewing selected students and interactions with student council members. The following findings and recommendations come from these data sources.

1. All heights and weights for both boys and girls in grades 6-9 were analyzed. The following chart summarizes these data.

		BOYS		GIRLS	
		Wt. (lbs)	Ht. (in.)	Wt. (lbs)	Ht. (in.)
6th	M	93.74	58.46	94.76	59.15
	Md.	91	58	90	60
	range	56-143	51-63	63-176	52-65
7th	M	90.83	59.8	103.8	60.995
	Md	85	59	99	61
	range	63-164	55-78	73-178	56-66
8th	M	121.37	64.27	116.44	63.59
	Md	117	64	118	64
	range	82-264	58-71	87-157	60-69
9th	M	135.53	66.495	124.77	63.778
	Md	132	67	125	64
	range	86-229	56-73	76-224	56-70

The results suggest that for the boys there are two marked growth spurts - between 7th and 8th graders, and between 8th and 9th graders in both weight and height of the former group. For girls, a similar pattern exists. 6th grade boys and girls show a characteristic similarity in weight and height statistics. 7th grade boys and girls show marked differences with the girls outweighing and being taller than their chronological equals in boys. By 8th grade, the between sex differences are reduced. The 9th grade pattern shows the boys catching up and exceeding the 9th grade girls. From a height and weight comparison, 6th and 7th grade boys are quite similar (disregarding a slight weight decrease in 7th grade boys). 7th and 8th grade boys are quite dissimilar. 8th and 9th grade boys are dissimilar with regard to weight differences, but similar with regard to height increases. 6th and 7th grade girls are relatively

similar in weight and height. Girls increase in height from 7th grade on in linear at best. The greatest difference in weight increase occurs between 7th and 8th grade for girls.

Recommendations: The statistical significance of these data was not computed. However, certain obvious variations were noted taking 1980-81 6th-9th grades heights and weights as representative of other years to come. It would appear that grade level, coeducational physical activities should be discouraged. Perhaps the physical education program could be reorganized to group students according to size compatibility rather than grade level. Also, since there are marked growth spurts in both boys and girls, the health, physical education and recreational needs of these learners need to be realized in their programs.

2. Students at all levels (6th through high school) indicated support of sports programs. Many, however, felt that the interscholastic nature of the junior high and high school programs should be expanded to allow greater participation of more students and in recreational and leisure sports forms.

Recommendation: Mainstream the necessary extramural sports program for the interested and athletically able student, but initiate a comprehensive intramural program that runs during the school day as an integral part of the school offering.

3. Academically, the most recent achievement test scores from the 4th, 6th and 7th grades were reviewed. Primary attention was given to the reading comprehension and total mathematical scores as indicators of academic potential/progress. These test scores are on students now in the 5th, 7th and 8th grades.

Across the three elementary schools, the reading scores tend to be higher than the math scores but a drop in the reading scores

at the 7th grade level is accompanied by an overall increase of the math scores. Percentile ranges across the three schools over the two grades tested are as follows:

4th grade reading	43%-tile	-71%tile
4th grade math	33%-tile	-76%tile
6th grade reading	46%-tile	-71%tile
6th grade math	41%-tile	-78%tile
7th grade reading	56%-tile	
7th grade math	66%-tile	

Recommendation: Continue a comprehensive reading program for all 7th grade learners and as a remediational program for 8th grade learners. Furthermore, due consideration at the middle/junior high school level must be given to the range of entry level abilities into the new or existing program. If a continuous progress skill development curriculum is developed for reading, language arts related and mathematical skills, then considerably more individualization will have to occur in grades 6, 7, and 8.

4. Many teachers, parents and students suggested a need for a wider range of elective options at the 6, 7, 8, 9 grade levels. Current emphases and scheduling structure preclude expansion of this element of curriculum.

Recommendation: Revamp the elective/exploratory options into more yet shorter duration options for learners based on approved required needs and yet to capitalize on the many and varied interests of the early adolescent learners.

5. Nearly all audiences tapped for information concerning this study expressed concern and interest in expanding the schools curriculum to include all organized and planned affective education component for early adolescent learners. Acceptance of self and others, coping

skills, leadership training, peer interactions and pressure control were some of the specific topics suggested.

Recommendation: Initiate an advisor-advisee/home based affective education program for grades 6-8. This program will facilitate any transitions from program to program as well as growth stage to growth stage and will serve as a youth advocacy program by caring adult educators.

6. Parts of most groups interviewed expressed concern about the lack of timed and appropriate programming about human development, drugs and alcohol education. These areas of concern are a reflection of a nearly pandemic set of problems faced by today's youth.

Recommendation: Review and drastically revise with updating a health education curriculum that includes these and other areas (emotions, values, moral development). Sequence the development of these topics throughout the upper elementary and middle level years as an integral part of the schools' curriculum.

Conclusions: The feasibility for revising the middle years education for Augusta's early adolescents is very positive. Although some barriers exist both to the physical housing of a revised program and the age ranges to be included in this revised program, this investigator recommends, in addition to the general and specific recommendations forthwith discussed:

1. the establishment of a representative advisory council, made up of students, teachers, administrators and parents to study thoroughly a conversion to a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 grade level configuration for the Augusta Public Schools.
2. an 18 month to 24 month timeline be generated between now and the actual start of any new program for middle level education to include a suggested phasing in of curricular and instructional revisions.

3. the district-wide curriculum committee act as a clearing-house for the development and refinement of a new, more comprehensive middle level curriculum plan that is articulated with all K-12 levels of need and learner characteristics.
4. the district-wide inservice committee take the recommendation of this study and of the advisory committee (#1 above) along with the suggestions from the curriculum committee and develop a comprehensive set of inservicing needs for personnel to be involved in implementing the new middle level education plans.
5. the Board of Education make a philosophical commitment to these changes proposed with the understanding that appropriate funding, resources and personnel requests will probably be made in order to maximize the effectiveness of these changes.

With these recommendations in mind, what was the next step, Dr. James?

When only one person is involved in the change process, then the education process can be quite specific. When many diverse groups are involved the option-demands increase. However, in this situation, the major educating process was directed to and through the district-wide middle grades steering committee. All intermediate grades and current junior high school teachers were invited to apply for committee membership. In addition, parent representatives, administrators and a Board of Education member were appointed to the committee. The consultant acted as task organizer, provacateur, and ad hoc committee member. The committee, once formed, embarked

on an ambitious and indepth study of middle grades educational program options by reading, consulting, visiting and attending state, regional and national conferences. Throughout this process, these committee members maintained close contact with their constituents for input, discussion and rumor squelching. The process worked. The press was fair, the public stayed informed and distantly interested, the Board of Education was updated frequently by committee member reports, and teachers and students had representatives who were vocal and informed. After over a year of deliberations, the committee developed plans to submit to the Board of Education for consideration.

Dr. Boyles, how successful was this educating process in your particular district?

Once the Board of Education had reviewed, discussed, and decided on this study's findings and recommendations, the next step was detailed planning at all levels. Following is a scheme which lists the various elements that were dealt with in the process. In fact, one could probably use the scheme in a basic planning model that could be used in a situation in which another curricula change is considered.

Develop student profiles
|
Develop objectives
|
Develop programs
|
Develop evaluation scheme
|
Identify phased implementation plans
|
Select administration/instructional staffs
|
Inservice as needed
|
Orient all parties to change
|
"Open" new school program

Although this model is an over-simplification of the myriad of elements that need attention, it did provide direction for implementation of the plan once adopted.

In summary, it appears that there are a few major principles of operation that should be followed in making a transition to a different organization of classes in a district. They are:

1. focus the major emphasis for the design of the new organization on a quality consultant and the heart of the faculty in the school undergoing the greatest change,
2. schedule major decision making times when it appears that the leadership of the study is ready to recommend decisions,
3. appropriately involve the local education association in staffing decisions,
4. phase in a few curricular changes from time to time instead of all the changes at one time,
5. involve parents and citizens in discussions about potential change very early in the study,
6. if a part of the plan doesn't seem to be gaining good support, re-evaluate, make necessary adjusts in the original plan, and start again.

Success for an educational change of this nature comes over defined periods of time through the efforts of a number of people.

Dr. James, what occurred next in this change process?

Most school districts that have initiated purposeful change processes for improving middle grades educational programs eventually realize that a local model is the only viable solution. Other authorities, other schools, other personnel can influence the final choices, but local conditions, energies, and manpower ultimately combine to establish a unique response to needs. So was the case in this situation. After a day-long staff development experience led by the consultant, the planning committee resolved many issues that had been studied, discussed, and

debated by generating a "this we believe" series of statements relative to the learner, the school, the teacher, the community, programs and several other categories. Once generated, these statements were prioritized and combined as appropriate to guide the development of proposed changes. The tentative suggestions were again discussed with various constituents for refinement before final committee recommendations to the Board of Education.

Final approval, support for, and implementation of improvement-based changes have become a local and internal process. Except as necessary, the consultant has removed himself after the developmental phases of this district's middle grades program redefinition. Success of the process can be measured by the relative lack of political and educational infighting, the continued interest and involvement of all parties to the decision proposing and making agreements, and the improved channels of communications between and among the various teams who rallied to foster necessary changes in middle grades education.

Dr. Boyles, after working through this process, what advice could you offer to other school district administrators concerning curricula change?

Curricula change is a complex process. In my opinion, change requires a full consideration of why it is needed, what reasonable options are available to deal with the needs that are not currently being met, and a genuine commitment in the leadership of the district to stimulate and allow for extensive consideration of everyone's ideas in regard to the nature of the results that will probably be brought about by a change when it is finally adopted. In those instances where some individuals' roles will be changed full involvement of those individuals in designing the new role should be

made available. In addition it is extremely helpful if an individual (either on the district staff or from outside the district-consultant) can be made available to "steer" the change process in an inquiring manner. It is necessary for a change process to be appropriately "engineered" or a great deal of confusion without many results will occur.

Dr. James, do you have anything to add to Dr. Boyles' advice?

Tag teams in wrestling, doubles for tennis, college debate teams, and a Board of Education-Consultant relationship all share some features in common if their major goal is to improve an established outcome. These features include: effective communications networks and languaging precision, cooperative planning and strategy development, clear purpose and time requirements, and support for and tolerance of diverse ideas. Such has been the case over the past several years as one South-Central Kansas School District working with a university consultant "teamed" to improve the curricular, instructional, organizational and operational elements of the middle grades segment of their K-12 system.

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